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STATEMENT BY THE BAHA'I INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Women in development

1. The Baha'i International Community welcomes the efforts of UNICEF to focus attention on the plight of the girl child. Since deciding a year ago to give priority to the girl child, UNICEF has contributed significantly to an increase in global awareness of the effects of gender discrimination on millions of girls. By funding research, encouraging the disaggregation of data, disseminating information and requiring that UNICEF programmes be sensitive to the needs of girls, UNICEF has initiated a process that deserves ongoing, wholehearted support.

2. In the view of the Baha'i International Community, the advancement of civilization now requires the full participation of everyone, including women. For this to happen, girls and boys must be valued equally by their families and by society. We share the distress of UNICEF at the blatant neglect of girls, justified in many parts of the world as part of local cultures. We concur with the recommendation, set forth in the "Progress report on achievements made in the implementation of UNICEF policy on women in development" (E/ICEF/1991/L.5), that UNICEF broaden its approach to maternal health to include an attempt to alter factors that affect girls' and women's health before maternity, including harmful traditional attitudes and practices.

3. Not only must girls receive adequate food, health care and education, but they must be given every opportunity to develop their capacities. Girls will not only render service to humanity as mothers and the first educators of the next generation, but, as women, they will make special contributions to the creation of a just order - an order characterized by vigour, cooperation, harmony and a degree of compassion never before witnessed in history. Mothers can now be the primary agents for empowering individuals to transform society. They alone can inculcate in their children the self-esteem and

respect for others essential for the advancement of civilization. It is clear, then, that the station of mothers, increasingly denigrated in many societies, is in reality of the greatest importance and highest merit.

4. Women and girls must be educated - spiritually, emotionally and intellectually - because a mother cannot pass on what she does not have. A child needs a nurturing environment and wise guidance in the first years of life in order to develop sound character and a well-trained mind. If the mother is unable, because of her own deficiencies, to provide her children with experiences that will equip them for later, formal schooling, they will find themselves at a serious, often crippling, disadvantage. It must be stressed, however, that this dual responsibility of developing the character and stimulating the intellect of the child also belongs to the family as a whole, including the father and grandparents, and to the community. As Agnes Aidoo, UNICEF Senior Adviser for Women, pointed out in her statement to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women at its 1991 session, "the family context provides unique opportunities for boy children and men to become involved in changing the status of the girl child and women". Non-governmental organizations can also contribute substantially by focusing attention on the girl child in their community-based activities.

5. As the sexes are equal in intellectual capacity and in potential to serve humanity, girls and boys should study the same curriculum. The way should be open for women and girls to enter all spheres of human endeavour, including the arts and sciences, agriculture, commerce, industry and affairs of state. There is no natural limit on women's ability.

6. The world is currently caught in a cycle of miseducation, wherein harmful character traits are passed from one generation to the next, retarding social progress. One source of this miseducation is the failure to respect women, even in the home. The denial of equality between the sexes perpetrates an injustice against half of the world's population and promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the workplace, to political life and, ultimately, to international relations. The world can ill afford the consequences of such ignorance and injustice, especially at this critical moment when prospects for establishing peace on this planet are bright.

7. The cause of universal education deserves the utmost support that the Governments of the world can lend it, for ignorance is indisputably the principal reason for the decline and fall of peoples and the perpetuation of prejudice. No nation can achieve success unless education is accorded to all of its citizens. Lack of resources limits the ability of many nations to fulfil this necessity, imposing a certain ordering of priorities. The decision-making agencies involved would do well to consider giving first priority to the education of women and girls, since it is through educated mothers that the benefits of knowledge can be most effectively and rapidly diffused throughout society.

8. The Baha'i International Community congratulates UNICEF for its initiatives and urges the UNICEF Executive Board to continue its important emphasis on the needs of the girl child.